Assassination drama to get fact check

By JAY SHARBUTT

POST TV

Docu-dramas on TV claim to re-create actual events. But occasionally they are accused of distorting history to heighten drama, of offering surmise as 100-proof fact.

Worried about complaints and the growth of docu-drama as a form of evening entertainment programming, CBS-TV chief Robert Wussler has taken an unusual step with a planned TV movie, "Four Days in Dallas."

He says CBS News will review it for accuracy.

"Dallas," about the 1963 slaying of President John F. Kennedy, traces the last days of accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald and of club owner Jack Ruby, who fatally shot Oswald after JFK's death.

Wussler, who during a 15-year stint as a CBS News producer helped prepare reports on Kennedy's assassination, says CBS News won't be asked to say if the show should or shouldn't air.

But he says if there's any doubt about the film's accuracy, its broadcast — scheduled for next spring — will be delayed and corrections made, or it will be postponed indefinitely.

He said "Dallas" is based in large part on the Warren Report, which found that Oswald acted alone in killing Kennedy.

CHECK FACTS

But he said involving CBS News in a review of this basically entertainment project wasn't prompted by fears of "fairness time" demands from critics who dispute the report's findings.

"No, it was not," he said. "It was prompted by our viewing of docu-dramas of other networks that we felt were major steps toward a revisionist theory of history."

He also said he didn't want children who watch docu-dramas to grow up with an erroneous view of history, noting that when kids see things on the tube "they think that's the real world.

"If we start doing historical things and we're loose with the facts, I think it's going to come back and haunt us, both from TV critics and people in the government."

Bob Williams is on vacation.

SENSITIVE SUBJECT

Wussler, the only network head with a news background, was asked if a CBS News review of docu-dramas will become the network's standard operating procedure for such programs.

"No," he said. It'll happen only "when we decide to go forward with a sensitive subject, a subject of public concern which still may be . . . an open matter or open controversy.

"Then we'll ask the president of our news division (Richard S. Salant) or other experts there about it. We don't want to put them in the position of making final judgments.

TESTING THOUGHTS

"But we certainly will seek out their thoughts on the subject matter and, having spent 15 years at CBS News, I think it'd be a very good idea to see how they felt.

"The most important thing is, I don't want to be responsible for rewriting history."

But ex-newsman Wussler doesn't agree with those who say docu-dramas are so frequent now that a news staffer should be assigned full time to check each and every show's accuracy.

"No, I think that's wrong," he said. "Because then you're mixing the news division with the entertainment division . . . and the news side shouldn't be put in that position."

But he said it's possible CBS soon will hire a program practices specialist "who has a background in that kind of historical information who could be called on to review (docu-dramas) with others on a day-to-day basis."

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